

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 254 851

CS 208 801

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TITLE Sins of Omission and Commission: The Press and Pre-Election Polls.
INSTITUTION Freedom of Information Center, Columbia, Mo.
REPORT NO FOI-505
PUB DATE Jan 85
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Elections; *Information Dissemination; Mass Media Effects; *Newspapers; *News Reporting; Public Opinion; *Reliability; *Validity
IDENTIFIERS *Opinion Polls

ABSTRACT

Noting that public opinion polls are here to stay, this report focuses on the difficulties of good poll reporting in newspapers that use (1) syndicated polls; (2) private polls from political candidates, or (3) their own polls, and argues that newspapers must learn how to report them well. The first section of the report traces the history of polling in American politics from the 1824 presidential campaign to the polls of the 1980s. The second section provides excerpts from criticism and praise of polling, and the third discusses reporting and analyzing errors. The fourth section offers guidelines for improving the reporting of polls, and the last discusses the continuing need for polling. (FL)

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SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM, UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI AT COLUMBIA
JANUARY, 1985

SINS OF OMISSION AND COMMISSION: THE PRESS AND PRE-ELECTION POLLS

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FREEDOM OF INFORMATION CENTER REPORT NO. 505

Syndicated polls, private polls and newspaper-generated polls are here to stay, and newspapers must understand how to report them well. The author of the following report focuses on reporting and analyzing errors with suggested guidelines for better reporting.

Reporting of polls by newspapers in the 1984 presidential election was similar to sins of omission and commission; the press was damned if it didn't, damned if it did.

The good-and-bad-of-poll-reporting debate got as much play as the Reagan and Mondale debates, and it continues. Are polls accurate or inaccurate? Are polls journalism or social science? Does poll coverage by newspapers report news or create news?

In the wake of the 1980 Republican victory, Bill Green wondered "if the experience of 1980 will lead the press to turn its back on polls and take risks in predicting political decisions,"¹ referring to the wide, unpredicted-by-press-or-polls gap between Reagan and Carter. Mr. Green can stop wondering; the press did not turn its back on polls. Instead they relied on "Public polls...private polls...telephone polls and door-to-door polls...call-in polls and call-out polls and exit polls and—well, the list could go on and on," John Dillin says. (*Christian Science Monitor*, 12-6-83)

This paper focuses on the difficulties of good poll reporting in newspapers that use syndicated polls (like Roper and Gallup), private polls from candidates or newspaper-generated polls either from syndication or their own paper. Polls are probably here to stay and newspapers must understand how to report them well. First in this paper is a brief history of polling and American elections. The second section contains excerpts of criticism and praise of reporting of polls, with the third section discussing reporting and analyzing errors. Suggested guidelines for reporting are given in the fourth section.

BRIEF HISTORY OF POLLING

The first account of a political fact-finding poll was reported in

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the July 24, 1824, issue of the *Harrisburg Pennsylvanian*, a straw vote taken at Wilmington, Delaware. Andrew Jackson received 335 votes with 169 for John Quincy Adams, 19 for Henry Clay and 9 for William Crawford. The Delaware legislature, with the power to select the state's presidential electors, chose men who would support Crawford in the electoral college. Later in the century, in the 1840's, a pre-election preference poll was taken by citizens recording their presidential preferences in the register of the hotel at which they were staying.²

A woman was the first candidate for public office to have a poll, taken in 1932. Mrs. Alex Miller, the first woman secretary of state in Iowa, is not remembered. But her son-in-law who used the sampling technique that guaranteed her a Democratic victory in Republican Iowa has not been forgotten—George Gallup.³

Before the 1920's, random sampling was not well understood, according to Richard Jensen. Newspapers in the 1840's conducted straw polls to predict election outcomes, and in 1896, the *Chicago Tribune* used reporters to canvass workers in Illinois factories and railroad yards. They found McKinley, the champion of industrialization, the choice of 82 percent of the factory hands and 86 percent of the railroaders. That same year the *Record*, an independent Chicago newspaper, spent over \$60,000 to mail postcard ballots to all 328,000 registered voters in Chicago. They employed astronomers rather than social scientists to interpret the results.⁴ Unknowingly, they may have been ahead of the times.

Straw polls continued to be popular with newspapers. The Hearst chain successfully predicted Hoover's landslide in 1928 by polling 46 states. Usually the straw polls were haphazard, but one by the *Columbus Dispatch* not only selected geographical locations but developed a quota system of sex, age, etc.⁵

The most famous—infamous—straw poll was that of the *Literary Digest*, a popular weekly magazine. The *Digest* mailed cards to potential subscribers, sometimes totaling 10 million pieces. By 1924, they were using telephone directories and automobile registration files. The method became the

madness when they reused their 1932 list rather than purchasing a new one in 1936. The telephone lists and automobile registrations had a simple, built-in bias. People who owned cars or phones were richer than those who did not. Class polarization was unknowingly reflected, predicting a Landon landslide.⁶ Roosevelt won with 55.7 percent of the vote. However, a 1976 analysis of that poll shows that it was also the nonrespondents that biased the poll. In hindsight, adjustments used in modern polling would have saved the poll. Richard Link says, "The 1936 Digest poll is a classic example of the fact that the failure to adjust bad data can also be fatal."⁷

As catastrophic as it seemed, 1936 meant the start of more scientific polls. George Gallup loved the Digest's defeat and advertised in *Editor and Publisher* with a full-page ad that he was more accurate.⁸ Franklin Roosevelt was the first President to use polling information.⁹ Polls became the "pulse for democracy" with the help of Gallup, who felt elections were inadequate in telling popular feelings, and that leaders needed a real "public opinion." Roosevelt first used poll manipulation by timing key announcements in World War II after analyzing opinions of the American public from pollster Hadley Cantril. In 1943, conservative congressmen passed legislation reducing the scope of government polling and publicity because they feared its misuse by the Office of War Information in controlling public opinion through censorship, publicity releases and close monitoring of attitudes.¹⁰

Polls continued to flourish until 1948 when Truman upset Dewey. The forecasts of the Dewey win questioned polls as the key to true democracy. Pollsters couldn't even get a simple election straight. It wasn't until the 1960's that polls again began to catch the imagination of the public and politicians, but the magic of polling was lost:

"Modern polls, it was said, could create a new self-awareness of society, showing leaders exactly what people believed, what they feared, and what they could be persuaded to accept. As the 1980's begin, we know that polls can indeed serve many useful purposes, but for better or for worse, the idea of statistical democracy died on Nov. 2, 1948, and is not likely to be resurrected."¹¹

This is one person's opinion. The aura of statistical democracy may have died, but the aura of statistics did not as revealed in the poll proliferation of 1984.

CRITICISM AND PRAISE OF POLL REPORTING

Albert Cantril, president of the National Council on Public Polls, maintains that there is a tension in reporting polls because "visible polling activity is an extension of journalism. At the same time, however, polling has its intellectual roots in social science."¹² It is that tension that makes critics claim reporting of polls is manufacturing news.

The thesis that newspapers create news is not novel. Daniel Boorstin in his book on pseudo-events and news, *The Image*, says, "We need not be theologians to see that we have shifted responsibility for making the world interesting from God to the newspaperman."¹³ Later in his book, he states a danger of polls—replacing the electoral process:

"The deepest peril of polls comes, however, not from their inaccuracy, but from their accuracy. If and when polls become

so scientific that they can precisely predict our opinions at the ballot box, at that moment they may cease to be very interesting; at the same time, of course, the process of voting will have become superfluous."¹⁴

Echoing that fear is Daniel Greenberg, publisher of *Science and Government Report*, (Cleveland Plain Dealer, 6-6-83):

"Furthermore, with their increasing accuracy in forecasting voting intentions, polls distort the electoral process by introducing an aura of inevitability to what should remain uncertain until the votes are counted. If the polls deem a contest lopsided, it becomes even more so."

He states further in the editorial that polling has caused a reversal of roles. Originally, a campaign exposed the candidate to the voters. With the advent of polling, the candidate now looks at the people to see what will sell himself to them, "It undermines representative government by inundating public dialog with bits and scraps of hastily delivered answers to oversimplified questions on complex issues...." Finally, Greenburg suggests the ultimate solution—not cooperating with pollsters. If you wish to reply, lie.

Bumping broadcasting from its rank, Cantril and Roll call polls the "Fifth Estate" and add that "polling" now touches the core of our national political process—integrated intimately into almost every aspect of its workings."¹⁵ They told how a bipartisan committee used the Gallup and Harris polls for determining which presidential candidates receive Secret Service protection. Any announced candidate getting at least 5 percent was entitled to protection as was any undeclared candidate receiving 20 percent.

Some critics say the media have replaced the two-party system. Bruce Altschuler, whose book, *Keeping a Finger on the Public Pulse*, is mostly about private polling by candidates, lists critics' views on election news. He states:

"A very similar critique argues that today's presidential elections are mass media elections. Thomas Patterson and Robert McClure believe that the party has been replaced by the mass media as the primary means of information about candidates and elections for the voter. The party ordered divergent interests and supplied information; instead the press provides news.... Election news concentrates on competition and controversy instead of basic policy and leadership questions."¹⁶

One way the press replaces the party system is by using polling to change the electoral process. Polling tells the public which candidates it will hear from in the future and determines the support the candidate receives:

"The ability to raise money, 'the mother's milk of politics,' is significantly affected by his standing in the polls. Volunteers and endorsements from political and interest groups also tend to follow good poll results.... Professor William C. Adams of George Washington University.... has demonstrated that 'news attention throughout 1983 was apportioned so that it almost perfectly paralleled candidate standings in the polls.... Prior visibility begets high poll ratings, which beget media coverage/legitimacy, which begets improved poll standings, which beget media coverage/legitimacy.'"

Even the candidates used polls for that purpose as Gary Hart and John Glenn tried to tell their party they were more electable than Walter Mondale. Adams reiterates in his "preliminary

report" on 1984 coverage of the elections, "The power to confer status and mold images does determine...who 'really matters.'"18

On the other hand, one pollster, Mervin Field, feels that the implied causal relationship between poll standing and funding is not as it seems:

"A candidate who cannot compete effectively for initial financing may also not be able to project a personality to the public which successfully competes for voter support. The polls in such a case merely reflect this state of voter perception, which happens to be matched by potential financial backer's similar perceptions of the candidate."19

Field has summarized some other effects, often mentioned in 1984, that polls have on people:

- ✓ (1) A poll which shows one candidate leading will discourage voters from supporting his opponent from voting at all.
- ✓ (2) A poll which shows one candidate leading will diminish the enthusiasm of his supporters.
- ✓ (3) A poll which shows one candidate leading will cause undecided voters to flock to his banner (bandwagon effect).
- ✓ (4) A poll which shows one candidate leading will cause undecided voters to move toward his opponent's banner (underdog effect).

Field discounts these theories by saying:

"Any mass conformity theory therefore runs counter to reference group notions, which hold that an individual's behaviour and attitudes are influenced greatly by the values and norms of the family or social group to which he belongs, or to which he aspires to belong."20

He goes on to say that there have been times in elections when an observer might conclude that direct effects exist. However, since effects "are not predictable by any extant sociological theories, they must be treated as random effects which do not clearly favor one candidate or the other."21 Translated, this is the same principle that correlation does not imply cause and effect.

Newspapers have complicated poll coverage by manufacturing their own polls. John Dillin says (*Christian Science Monitor*, 12-6-83):

"Today more of the media...do their own polling. That raises the issue of conflict of interest. A newspaper, for instance, may push its own poll....One wag says he has yet to see a TV network say: 'Yesterday we reported that our poll showed such-and-such. But a Gallup poll released today casts serious doubts on the validity of our poll.'"22

A 1980 study sent questionnaires to 817 daily newspapers, chosen randomly from the 1977 *Editor and Publisher Yearbook*. The questionnaire dealt only with papers' own polls, not syndicated ones. The study showed an overwhelming "acceptance of the idea that polling is a valid news gathering technique,"23 showing an acceleration during the 70's of the survey research aspect of precision journalism. Thirty-seven percent said their newspaper had conducted an opinion poll to gather information for stories, with a strong correlation between circulation size and conducting of polls. Eighteen percent of the papers felt their most recent poll had a "substantial" effect on community decision-making, and two percent said it had a

"great" effect. Out of 162 papers conducting a poll, 67 did the poll with the news staff alone. The study says that evidence questioned the quality of some of the polls:

"The fact that so many papers, especially among those of smaller circulation, rely heavily upon their news staffs for the essential elements of their surveys is reason alone to question the professional niceties of at least some polls...large non-response of editors in relation to polling methods...may also imply an imprecise understanding of the techniques that must be used in order to do accurate survey research."24

Some feel polling has become more a part of journalism than social science. Albert Cantril was quoted (*Wall Street Journal*, 9-11-80) by James Perry, "It's journalism" he says, with a certain sense of distaste." Cantril had predicted this overlapping in 1976:

"Without being unduly cynical, it is clear that the major purpose of the media is to generate advertising revenue and that the amount of that revenue depends upon the share of the market that is captured. The considerable sums spent on polling must therefore be viewed, in large part, as an investment toward building an audience. Polling often becomes a means rather than an end in itself."25

He goes further to say that these economic considerations impose some "stringent requirements" on the kind of polling done. He lists the requirements:

- ✓ (1) Brevity, no more than 1,000 short words.
- ✓ (2) Topicality—must be attractive compared to other stories of the day.
- ✓ (3) Timeliness—simply, they must be up to date, which has increased the more unreliable telephone polling technique.
- ✓ (4) Clarity—the stories must be simple to tell. Readers don't have time for complex issues.
- ✓ (5) Broad appeal—the polls must appeal to many.26

It is the old gatekeeping question again—what gets reported in a newspaper's space? However, critic Michael Wheeler recognizes that newspapers cannot operate as scholarly journals, giving three reasons why not:

- ✓ (1) Space...Gallup and Harris organizations typically send out press releases of a sparse 750 words...trim back to a few paragraphs.
- ✓ (2) Economic...one serious national poll could support a good reporter for the better part of a year.
- ✓ (3) Need for drama...it is news when the president's approval rating shoots up or down, but it is less interesting when he simply holds steady. Thus, there is pressure for public pollsters to generate results that show conflict on important issues or depict constantly shifting support for candidates.27

This "need for drama" is called horse-race journalism and is prevalent in polling stories. James Gannon says (*Des Moines Register*, 5-8-81) that "too many polls focus on the political horse races—trial heats of one candidate vs. another. More polls ought to explore people's attitudes on basic issues in a campaign...."

There are journalists that recognize the need to downplay the horse race aspect, but Roper Phelps, executive editor of the *Boston Globe*, tells of putting a horse-race figure in paragraph 18. "But sure enough, when the wires picked it up, they put the figures in the lead."28

Evans Witt, director of polling in 1980 for the Associated Press, says "The horse race numbers can be wrong, and they are too simple a rendering of public opinion...can't capture the essence...in one set of figures."²⁸

Not only positioning of polls dramatizes them, but some critics charge that "political scientists contend that to please editors, pollsters sometimes exaggerate their findings well beyond what it is in their data. 'There is pressure to create news where it doesn't exist,' observes Burns Roper."²⁹

Steven Rosenstone, associate professor of political science at Yale, has this advice to journalists about horse-race journalism and the need to dramatize (*Los Angeles Times*, 12-6-83):

"Recognize that your obsession with the horse race has a pernicious effect on the presidential selection process. You turn primary winners into losers, and losers into winners because a candidate does not fulfill your expectations—expectations that were based on erroneous pre-election polls....We would be better served by your telling us about the candidates' positions, their strategies for governing, how they will manage the executive branch and work with Congress and heads of state."

Yet with all the criticism, newspapers continue to use polling because it facilitates reporting. How does it do that? Greg Schneiders collected some reporters' viewpoints:

"'Competitive pressures...and a basic lack of confidence in making political judgments subjectively,' says Jack Germond. Bob Shogan of the *Los Angeles Times* believes that 'a poll has a kind of fascination because it is a measurable event. There are winners and losers.' Fred Barnes thinks it is 'blind faith in numbers, tangible numbers.' 'It's an easy story,' says Jack Nelson, 'and so the media is likely to say, 'the more polls the better.'"

"It is a quick story, an easy story. And, it is safe; the numbers are the fall guy if your story turns out to be wrong....Reporters, though they're usually too crusty to say such things are, after all, only looking for and trying to communicate the truth....All those numbers and all that pretense of precision and methodological mumbo-jumbo beckons them like the siren call of a new journalistic positivism. Like the original positivists, they can become suckers for empirical data—however unreliable."³⁰

In a forecast for 1984, James Cannon reiterated (*Des Moines Register*, 5-8-81) the dependence on number journalism, "We have come to rely too much on computerized print-outs of numbers, and too little on old-fashioned reporting and the instinct and intuition of veteran campaign reporters."

Using polls is not all negative. Evans Witt points out some positive aspects of polling:

"No longer is the press tied to colorful but often misleading man-on-the-street interviews to gauge public reaction to a candidate or major news event. No longer do political reporters need to rely on the carefully leaked results of a candidate's polls to get the latest information on how the campaign is playing in Dubuque. No longer must they rely on precinct bosses to tell them which way the political winds are blowing."³¹

Not only can polling make the reporter's job easier, the *New York Times* (7-29-84) feels polling has a positive effect on the electoral process. In an editorial tribute after the death of Gallup, the guru of modern polling, they said:

"But good polls, if read correctly, are shaping not only political contests but government itself. They obviously provide a lively measure of public opinion. They're now a tool of democracy, a mighty legacy."

Newspapers admit they have faults about reporting, but polls do help reliability in reporting. The *Washington Post National Weekly Edition* (4-23-84) says:

"Perhaps we do stress the horse race angle more than we should....But many people want to know how an election is shaping up, and while the polls may not be perfect, they are the most reliable source of information around. The odds are much better than Russian roulette."

Another advantage to newspaper poll reporting is pollsters speeding up their process. John Dillin says (*Christian Science Monitor*, 12-6-83), "Polls today come out two weeks faster than they did four years ago, and that makes the data fresher and more pertinent." Roper echoes with, "If a poll is more than four days old, the news media see little utility in it." He adds that the media once resisted polling but now embraces it, "By their conversion to polls, the media have given the public a louder voice than it has had heretofore."³²

Polling as a necessary part of an open democracy is supported by Albert Gollin of the Newspaper Advertising Bureau, "'a powerful tool against the powerful.'"³³ Also supporting that idea is Leo Bogart in *Silent Politics*, who says, "A restriction of the right to question people's opinions is a threat to their right to hold them."³⁴

That right to hold an opinion, and sway a politician with that opinion, was shown in the New Hampshire primary. A *Washington Post/ABC News* tracking survey showed that Mondale was hurt by the charges that he was promising special interest groups too many things. Commenting on that tracking poll, and others, prompted (*Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, 4-23-84) this observation:

"The tracking polls along with surveys by other news agencies have led the way in providing valuable clues to what Americans think and care about. Reporters and other observers may intuitively draw the same conclusions, but not with the same authority as the polls."

REPORTING AND ANALYZING ERRORS

If polls were easily understood, newspapers would have no reporting problems. Without reading like a statistics textbook chapter, this section discusses common problems with polls that newspapers must understand. First, are polls inaccurate? No, they are not—if there are no errors in the methodology. But with sampling and non-sampling errors, there are mistakes and inaccuracies.

The New Hampshire primary polls, with six major polls published in the two prior weeks, showed Mondale in the lead. However, he lost. Edward Dolnick says (*Boston Globe*, 7-16-84):

"Pollsters tend to emphasize the fickleness of public opinion. 'If a poll is done well, it gives a snapshot at a particular time, but it has limited predictive value because the political scene is so volatile,' says Richard Jaeger, a sociologist at the University of North Carolina."

Robert Reinhold cites (*New York Times*, 8-15-84) different experts' opinions on why polls have discrepancies, saying that most experts "believe that their craft remains a valid, if imperfect, means of monitoring political attitudes." He says that Peter Hart, pollster for the Democratic ticket, says that the number of polls prompts taking polls at the "most turbulent moments, and therefore they often 'measure from artificial to artificial.'"

To shake one's faith in polls, consider this one cited by Reinhold. An early July poll from Harris gave Reagan the same 8-point margin that Gallup did. However, Harris showed the President five points ahead immediately after the Democratic convention when Gallup's poll for *Newsweek* gave it to Mondale by two points. He cites a *New York Times*/CBS News poll taken July 12 showing Reagan leading by 18 points, 52-34, while an ABC News poll showed the candidates virtually even. A *Washington Post*/ABC News poll a week earlier had Reagan leading 51-44, just 7 points. Adding to the mixture was an NBC News poll taken about the same time with Reagan leading by 26 points. To really make it interesting, 10 days later, the Gallup/*Newsweek* Poll had Mondale ahead by two points.

Confused? So was the press and the public.

To report about such confusion, reporters must understand sampling error, non-sampling error and poll analysis. However, this paper cannot give all the answers; several chapters are recommended.³⁵

What is sampling error? Gary Lorden, professor of mathematics at CalTech describes (*Los Angeles Times*, 11-9-82) sampling and polling like this:

"If someone gives you a big bag of apples and wants to know the ratio of red apples to green apples in the bag, how many apples would you have to take out before you felt confident you were reasonably certain of the answer? Not very many, the statisticians say. If the first 10 apples were red, the chances are very good that reds predominate in the bag."

However, pollsters are not determining red and green apples but fickle voters. Ideally, a poll takes a perfectly random sample of the American electorate and with the laws of statistical probability, the preferences of 1,500 people shouldn't differ from all the electorate by a sampling error of any more than three percentage points either way. But polls are less than ideal. "In practice, however, it is impossible to obtain a sample that is entirely representative of the larger electorate. Many people are not at home, and there is mounting resistance to survey takers," assesses the *Kansas City Times* (8-15-84).

The American Newspaper Publisher's Association's guide to reporting polls suggests:

"A reporter must look carefully at the type of sampling and survey method used in polling. Make sure that some form of probability (random) sampling is used if you are generalizing to a larger population.

"Inquire about sampling error tolerance estimates and the number of interviews actually completed from the initial sample. Probe to see whether the researcher has compared sample results on demographic characteristics with similar data from the population sampled (available from census material)."³⁶

Sometimes a sampling error (called a non-sampling error by some) occurs by not determining who will actually vote in the election or primary. David Leuthold says that the Gallup organization has a process of nine different questions which it fits together to determine whether the poll takers will actually vote.³⁷

A 1984 report that detailed a method of forecasting voting behavior used factors such as voter registration, voting in past elections, along with interest in the campaign. The lengthy report cannot be completely summarized here, but it does show that this is a problem area in determining sampling error. When talking of the predictive index, the report said private pollsters provide that information, but "public pollsters have been less successful in transmitting this information to their readers and viewers because of news judgments related to available space and a reluctance to present conditional views of current events."³⁸ In nonacademic language, that means that newspapers often don't write about determining who will actually vote because (1) there isn't enough room, and (2) it makes a poll seem unsure.

Greg Schneiders, who worked in the campaigns of Jimmy Carter and John Glenn, calls sampling error the one the public best understands and the easiest to report. However, sampling error is often ignored. He cites examples of widely reported polls indicating abrupt changes in public opinion. These changes, however, were within the margin of sampling error, a fact not reported by the media.

Roper says reporting sampling error is "a cuddle blanket" for journalists:

"Many journalists (and their readers), unaware of the reasons that usually account for poll variability, assume the too common explanation of 'sampling error' to account for discrepancies—and even volatility. In my view, this is usually an erroneous conclusion."⁴⁰

Visions, again, of omission and commission sins. Reporters were criticized for NOT reporting sampling error, so they began to report it. Now they're criticized FOR reporting it. Roper continues:

"One solution is for the press always to include the question wording when reporting the results of a survey. In my judgment, that would be a far better use of time and space than to put in the wholly misleading plus-or-minus-percent-error statement."⁴¹

Cantril says that the greatest errors in polling are not in sampling stages, but in interviewer cheating and wording and placement of questions. These kinds of errors are non-sampling errors.⁴²

One non-sampling error is the timing of polls. Alvin Sanoff says:

"Polls taken immediately after a major event usually imply that public opinion has already crystallized. In fact, it can take days for public perceptions to harden. Meanwhile, the poll suggesting that attitudes are etched in stone has been widely disseminated, with unknown consequences for the governed and the governors."⁴³

Another non-sampling error results from the method of questioning. Mail surveys have been abandoned for personal interview or telephone interviews. The telephone survey is the most common used, but Gallup often uses the personal interview. Still another non-sampling error falls in the "how the question was asked" and "where did the question get placed" categories. An example of this type of question: In 1983, Lou Harris asked people to agree or disagree with the statement, "Just because John Glenn was a national hero, the first man to ride in outer space, doesn't mean that qualifies him to be presi-

dent.⁴⁴ That question can be interpreted in many ways. Or a question may be asked in the wrong order. If issue questions are asked before asking who will one vote for, the respondents may be reminded of problems of the country and not answer the same way if the question were on top of the list.

However, if a paper succeeds in reporting sampling and non-sampling error, it is still challenged by reporting a good analysis. An example of analysis is given below and is a good example of what NOT to do:

"Washington Post, (10-2-84) 'Forty-two percent of the voters support Reagan against Mondale or Glenn. Forty-four percent support either Democrat against Reagan. Slightly over 8 percent support Glenn over Reagan, but prefer Reagan over Mondale; slightly under 6 percent support Mondale over Reagan, but prefer Reagan over Glenn. Thus, there is a 2 percent difference in the numbers of those who like Glenn but not Mondale and vice versa, 2½ percent with rounding.'"⁴⁵

So much for clear analysis reporting.

Michael Wheeler criticizes the press harshly for its failure to do a good job of analyzing:

- ✓(1) The most flagrant error...common practice of reporting polls as if each American holds a firm opinion on every topic.
- ✓(2) The failure to distinguish between voter opinion and public opinion.
- ✓(3) The press too often accepts a hypothesis that is contrary to fact...early trial heats often crowd out polls that are much more revealing.
- ✓(4) If newspapers are intent on publishing the latest head-to-head races, then they should have their pollsters also ask about second choices.
- ✓(5) Disheartening how little the press does with issue polls.
- ✓(6) If one pervasive omission in the reporting of polls, it is the failure to acknowledge varying intensities of opinion.⁴⁶

Burns Roper gives 10 significant effects of journalism on polling. Below are six of those 10 that he felt showed the newspapers' inability to report polls:

- ✓(1) The media converts (to polling) have made a mistake, however, in taking a bright newsman, sending him to a two-to six-week course on polling techniques and then establishing him as their survey expert.
- ✓(2) In the process of stressing sampling error, they have not warned the reader or viewer of error as they have intended...have implied an unwarranted degree of accuracy.
- ✓(3) Now are in the position of making news, not merely reporting it.
- ✓(4) The media have a natural inclination to push their own polls.
- ✓(5) The news media have put unwarranted premium on speed.
- ✓(6) Complex issues tend to be dealt with in oversimplified questions that are designed not to exceed 10 to 15 words.⁴⁷

GUIDELINES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR POLL REPORTING

The previous section is the bad news. The good news is that 1984 was also the year of election poll guidelines to help report-

ers and editors. Various journal articles, the AP Log and Editor and Publisher got on the bandwagon of providing guidelines.

One of the best for a reporter and editor is *Newsroom Guide to Polls and Surveys*.⁴⁸ The book is divided into five parts: Evaluating Survey Questionnaires, Evaluating Survey Interviewing, Evaluating Survey Sampling, Evaluating Survey Results and Reporting Survey Results. The overview section of the book says,

"As a journalist you should study this book for two reasons: (1) so that you don't misinform yourself, and (2) so that you don't misinform your readers....This book seeks to take the mystery out of survey research."⁴⁹

Paul Lavrakas and Richard Hainey, assistant professor and professor with the Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University, give a litmus test for telephone surveys by listing five questions to ask. An example of one question: What percent of those contacted refused to be interviewed?⁵⁰

Evans Witt feels that reporters are gaining knowledge about polls and that most news organizations follow guidelines revised in 1979 by the National Council on Public Polling. They are:

- ✓(1) State who sponsored the survey.
- ✓(2) Give the dates of interviewing.
- ✓(3) Define the method of interviewing.
- ✓(4) Describe the population interviewed.
- ✓(5) Reveal the size of the sample.
- ✓(6) Describe and give the size of any subsamples used in the analysis.
- ✓(7) Release the wording of all questions.
- ✓(8) Release the full results of the questions on which the conclusions are based.
- ✓(9) Do not remain silent if a client publicly releases and misrepresents a poll result.⁵¹

He gives further guidelines by advising that "polls are often more useful for what they show about changing public opinion than for what they reveal about what the public thinks at the latest date." Other suggestions are comparing state and national polls and writing about conflicting competent polls. In a close race, use his rule of thumb, "Unless the difference between the candidates is twice the sampling error, one should hedge the statement that one candidate leads the other."⁵²

TO SAMPLE OR NOT TO SAMPLE

Since Reagan did not turn out to be the new Dewey, polls will probably be prevalent in the 1986 congressional and 1988 presidential elections. Somehow the press will have to learn how to use polling stories to the public's and papers' good or continue to lose credibility. Political science will not stop in its search for the perfect way to forecast elections. Rosenstone has devised a recent model to explain elections. He says about predictions:

"As election forecasts are refined and forecasting models become an integral part of candidates' and interest groups' political arsenals, the costs to democracy may far outweigh any benefits. Our ultimate challenge will be to put these discoveries

to work in ways that will better enable citizens to select leaders who will represent their interests."⁵³

Social science marches on, and journalism must, too. But it cannot forget the admonition from Evans Witt:

"Polls are a tool for gathering information, more complicated and tricky than most methods, but still only a tool, to be used with more familiar ones in every reporter's and editor's kit."⁵⁴

FOOTNOTES

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- 29 Alvin P. Sanoff, "Behind All Those Jumpy Political Polls," *U.S. News & World Report*, September 17, 1984, p. 33.
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- 35 See chapters 4, 5, 6 in Maxwell McCombs, et al., *The Handbook of Reporting Methods* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976).
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- 44 Schneiders, p. 49.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- 46 Wheeler, p. 42-43.
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